

# E GULL

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE GOLDEN GATE AUDUBON SOCIETY



EST. 1917



Sivaprasad P. L./www.birdsofthebay.com

Golden Eagles are among the raptors impacted by turbines at the Altamont Pass. Nearly 2,000 raptors are killed each year.

## Wind Companies Make Little Progress in Altamont Pass

**B**ird mortality has not been reduced in the Altamont Pass over the last four years according to the draft 2009 Bird Fatality Study released by Alameda County on December 18, 2009. Although Golden Gate Audubon and four other Bay Area Audubon chapters sued and eventually settled with Alameda County and several wind companies to force a reduction of bird mortality in the Altamont Pass, it appears that the wind companies' efforts have not gone far enough.

Dr. K. Shawn Smallwood, a member of Alameda County's Scientific Review Committee (SRC) and a longtime researcher in the Altamont, estimated that in the last four years, the Altamont Pass has killed approximately 7,600–9,300 birds per year. Annually, the death toll in the Altamont Pass is approximately 645–1,967 raptors total, including 55–94 Golden Eagles, 475–477 American Kestrels, 253–433 Red-tailed Hawks, and 714–718 Burrowing Owls. Dr. Smallwood attributes the lack of reduction in avian mortality to the wind companies' failure to adequately implement the recommendations of the SRC.

The draft Bird Fatality Study's authors and Dr. Smallwood conclude that there is no evidence that avian mortality has been reduced 50 percent as required by our 2007 settlement. The data also indicate that certain measures—such as winter shutdowns

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## GGA Launches Spring Birdathon

**W**hat's the most fun you have ever had birding while making a significant difference for environmental protection? This spring, you have a chance to set personal records for both.

Golden Gate Audubon invites you to join us for our first Birdathon in nearly 20 years. From April 17 to May 16. Our goal is to provide you with an enjoyable event that will also support GGA's vital work to protect the Bay Area's birds and other wildlife and their natural habitat.

The Birdathon is like a walk-a-thon, except that you count bird species instead of miles. As a participant, you can ask friends and family to pledge a donation to Golden Gate Audubon on a fixed or per-species basis. You then try to see as many species as possible in a period of up to 48 consecutive hours between April 17 and May 16. Afterward, you collect the pledges. Proceeds from this event directly support GGA's educational and conservation programs.

This is designed to be an exciting and educational (and, for some, competitive) event for all levels of birders—from the total beginner to the advanced—as well as for those who just want cheer them on. To make it easier and more fun, you can join one of our scheduled guided trips, organize your own trip, or count independently in your backyard. And there are no geographic limits—you are free to go anywhere. If you want

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# Alameda Wildlife Refuge— Not Just an Empty Field

In a recent conversation about the proposed 575-acre Alameda Wildlife Refuge at the old Alameda Naval Air Station, an environmentalist friend remarked, “It doesn’t look the way I think a refuge should look—it’s just an old broken-up airfield.”

Dedicated birders and nature enthusiasts, however, know that the Alameda Wildlife Refuge provides vital habitat for at least 169 bird species and is home to the state’s most productive breeding colony for the endangered California Least Tern. Brown Pelicans, Horned Larks, and Loggerhead Shrikes are just a few of the other species that rely on the refuge.

California Least Terns were first observed at the Alameda Naval Air Station in the late 1970s. Over the past 30 years, the U.S. Navy, with assistance from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, has provided excellent stewardship of the tern colony, and we have watched it become one of the most important colonies in the species’ range. When the air station was closed in 1993, the navy began looking for a way to transfer the land to another owner. At the urging of Golden Gate Audubon, the USFWS requested the land for the creation of the Alameda Point National Wildlife Refuge.

In 1996, concerned citizens formed the Friends of the Alameda Wildlife Refuge (FAWR), which has looked out for the terns and other refuge wildlife ever since. Today, as a committee of Golden Gate Audubon, FAWR continues to advocate for creation of the refuge and protection of the terns, to conduct bird surveys twice each month, to hold seasonal monthly workdays to improve the tern habitat, and to educate the community.

Despite FAWR’s efforts, talks between the USFWS and the navy broke down in 2002 because the navy refused to accept long-term responsibility for the remaining contamination in the area. Eager to dispose of the property, the navy offered the land to the Veteran’s Administration, which now proposes to build a 122-acre medical and office complex directly on top of the proposed refuge, despite a 1999 Biological Opinion from the USFWS stating that such a project would jeopardize the tern colony. Tragically, this project shows a blatant disregard for the well-being of the California Least Terns and the other species that rely on the refuge. Golden Gate Audubon and FAWR continue to oppose the VA’s proposal.

In 2007, USFWS biologist Susan Euing developed the Tern Watch Program with the cooperation of FAWR. Tern Watch trains community volunteers to monitor the California Least Tern colony on the refuge, which is not open to the public. The volunteers count terns and report attacks by their many predators, including Burrowing Owls and Peregrine Falcons.

Because of these efforts, the California Least Tern population at the refuge has prospered. In 2008, the Alameda colony produced more fledglings than any other colony in California, even though colonies to the south are much larger. The stark landscape—the old, barren airfield that seems so unattractive to the casual visitor—provides perfect habitat for the terns. As the southern California Least Tern populations continue to plummet, the Alameda colony has become essential to the species’ continued survival.

To protect the California Least Tern and create the Alameda Wildlife Refuge, Golden Gate Audubon and FAWR need your help. Please attend an upcoming FAWR meeting, held the third Monday of each month. Training sessions for the 2010 Tern Watch season begin in April—no prior experience is necessary (look for details in the April *Gull*). More information about FAWR and its activities is available at [www.goldengateaudubon.org](http://www.goldengateaudubon.org).

—Mark Welther, Executive Director

## New Member Joins Golden Gate Audubon Board

GGA is pleased to announce the election of a new board member, Sarah Peterman. Sarah is an associate with the law firm Farella Braun and Martel LLP, where she focuses on environmental and natural resources litigation. Welcome, Sarah!



# CONSERVATION CORNER

## GGA RESPONDS TO SOUTHERN WATERFRONT PROJECT

In January, Golden Gate Audubon submitted comments to the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency and Planning Department on the Candlestick Point-Hunters Point Shipyard Phase II Development project. This is a massive project with plans to change the southeast section of San Francisco. The Lennar Corporation's proposal includes a new 49ers football stadium for 69,000 attendees, 10,500 residential units, a 200-room hotel, and a 200-slip marina, plus retail and office space, facilities for artists and the community, and park and open space.

Golden Gate Audubon expressed continued opposition to a bridge over Yosemite Slough and concerns about the project's impacts on San Francisco Bay, including offshore eelgrass beds, and on Candlestick Point State Recreation Area. Increased use, trash and food waste, and lighting will have significant impacts on local wildlife that are not adequately considered in the environmental impact report. We will continue to coordinate with other organizations and citizens in the area to ensure that the project is as protective of the local community and the environment as possible.

## HABITAT RESTORATION UNDER WAY AT BERKELEY'S AQUATIC PARK

The Berkeley Parks, Recreation, and Waterfront Department has been working to improve the habitat for birds and other wildlife at Aquatic Park by removing non-native vegetation and planting and native

trees and shrubs. The project includes installing a fence at the northeast corner of the park's southernmost lagoon in an effort to prevent illicit activities, to curtail the trampling of the understory, and to protect the Black-crowned Night Herons and other birds. Much of the work, which will be accomplished in phases, follows the recommendations of the 2003 Aquatic Park Natural Resources Management Study.

The department met with Golden Gate Audubon staff and invited our review and comments on the project. A working group of three GGA volunteers have already visited the park and provided initial comments. If you bird the park and want to learn about the restoration and how you can get involved, come to an upcoming meeting of the East Bay Conservation Committee.

## SNOWY PLOVERS CONTINUE TO LOSE OUT AT CRISSY FIELD

The start of 2010 was difficult for the Western Snowy Plovers at San Francisco's Crissy Field Wildlife Protection Area (WPA) when the Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA) moved the fence at the WPA despite our request that impacts to the plovers be considered. Off-leash dog advocates pressured the GGNRA to take this action after learning that the fence extended beyond the 700 feet designated for the WPA. Unfortunately for the plovers, the construction activity evicted the birds from their preferred habitat for at least a week. GGNRA staff insist that the fence will eventually provide more protection for

the plovers and allow for better enforcement of leash laws in the WPA.

After the fence was moved, Golden Gate Audubon met with GGNRA staff to discuss several issues, including protection of plover habitat at both Crissy Field and Ocean Beach. GGNRA staff informed us that the draft Dog Management Plan will be released this summer and have a 90-day public comment period. Current regulations require dogs to be on-leash in the plover protection areas at Ocean Beach. From Starwell 21 to Sloat Boulevard and Crissy Field's Wildlife Protection Area between July 1 and May 1. If you notice a disturbance or threat to the plovers, call Park Dispatch at 415-561-5505.

## UPCOMING EAST BAY MEETING WITH DOG OWNERS

For years, Golden Gate Audubon members and other wildlife advocates have been distressed to see off-leash dogs harassing birds and other wildlife or deterring birds from roosting or nesting. Past efforts involving docents and leash law enforcement have failed to protect even critical habitat, including habitat for the California Quail and Western Snowy Plover in San Francisco. At Berkeley's Cesar Chavez Park, there have been recent problems with dogs (usually off-leash) harassing the city's last remaining Western Burrowing Owls.

The East Bay Conservation Committee is trying a different approach and has formed a task force of about a dozen dog-owning GGA members to consider such initiatives as signage and fences, education, outreach, and, where necessary, enforcement. We hope that by involving the dog-owning community from the beginning, we can find workable solutions and compromises. We're starting with two of Berkeley's parks that are subject to big dog impacts, Aquatic Park and Cesar Chavez Park. This is an ambitious effort, and we can use more help, especially (but not exclusively) from dog owners. To get involved, please contact Joe Ferrie at [joe@oceanecology.org](mailto:joe@oceanecology.org).

## Join a Conservation Committee

Meet other birders and wildlife enthusiasts on your side of the bay and find out about projects in your community.

The East Bay Conservation Committee meets the first Tuesday of the month at 7 p.m. at the Golden Gate Audubon office, 2530 San Pablo Avenue, Berkeley. For further information, contact chair Phil Price ([pnprice@creekcats.com](mailto:pnprice@creekcats.com)).

The San Francisco Conservation Committee meets the first Wednesday of the month at 7 p.m. at the Randall Museum, 199 Museum Way ([www.randallmuseum.org](http://www.randallmuseum.org)).

Friends of the Alameda Wildlife Refuge meets the third Monday of the month. For time and location, contact cochair Leora Feeney ([leoraalameda@att.net](mailto:leoraalameda@att.net)).

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# Gray Flycatcher Highlights Oakland CBC

Would Oakland retain its title of "California Towhee Capital of the World"? Would we again lead in numbers of Steller's Jays and Chestnut-backed Chickadees? Would we enjoy element weather or be soaked by day's end? These questions confronted participants in Oakland's 69th annual Christmas Bird Count as the clock struck midnight, Sunday, December 20, had begun, and the count was on.

Beginning with predawn owling, 183 field observers diligently searched Oakland's 15-mile-diameter count circle, and another 17 identified and counted birds around their feeders. By day's end, they'd counted 89,232 individual birds, 7,000 more than the year before but still among the lower totals of the last 10 years. In perhaps Oakland's most significant button-busting, boasting category, participants found 15 percent fewer California Towhees than last year. Will this year's 667 little brown jobs be enough to retain our title? Chestnut-backed Chickadee numbers were up marginally, and Steller's Jay numbers were up 30 percent, giving hope that we'll again have something to brag about once final CBC compilations are in. And the weather held: temperatures were moderate, there was little wind, and there was no rain, at least until about 3:30 p.m. By then, many participants were already thinking about calling it a day and heading to the compilation dinner.

Although more individual birds were found than last year, our count's numbers are trending inexorably downward. The

trend affects many numerous species, but also some that have never been numerous. Some may already have winked out.

One or more Cattle Egrets were found every year from 1984 through 2003, but we've had none since a long-lived Lake Merritt bird died. We found five or more Ruddy Turnstones in every year except one through 2001. We dipped to single birds in 2003 and 2006; since then, there have been none. Prior to 2000, we found at least one Rock Wren in most years. After that, we've had three birds total, one each year from 2005 through 2007, but none since. Over 30 years, we averaged at least 60 Tricolored Blackbirds annually. Since 2004, we've found 25 total; this year there was only one. What will next year bring for these species?

Overall we recorded 175 species on count day, two fewer than our recent average, with another three species found during count week—the period three days on either side of count day. At the compilation dinner, an *Empidonax* flycatcher was chosen as the count's best bird, but with some angst because it wasn't identified to species. Angst turned to joy two days later, when the bird was re-found, and identified as a Gray Flycatcher. It was the Oakland CBC's first Gray Flycatcher ever, and apparently only the third one recorded in Northern California during the winter season. Returning rarities included a Palm Warbler along the Oakland Estuary for its third winter, and Lake Merritt's presumed hybrid male Hooded Merganser x Barrow's Goldeneye, detected for the fourth time since 2005.

Other unusual species included 10 swans (probably Tundra, on Briones Reservoir), one Red-necked Grebe (in Alameda's seaplane lagoon), one Common Moorhen (at Lafayette Reservoir), two Tree Swallows (also at Lafayette Reservoir), one House Wren (at the UC Botanical Garden), and two Hermit Warblers (on Berkeley's Panoramic Way and near Inspiration Point). Each of these species had been recorded in fewer than half of the preceding 10 years.

A "Slate-colored" Fox Sparrow in the



Patricia Bacchetti

Found but not identified on count day, this Gray Flycatcher in Oakland's Knowland Park was re-found, identified, and photographed on December 22, 2009.

Tilden Regional Park Botanic Garden continued this form's string of near annual occurrences. It's a reminder to note and document all forms other than our expected wintering "Sooty" birds, amid rumors that the Fox Sparrow complex will eventually be split. A count week Pileated Woodpecker in Redwood Regional Park was detected for the fourth time since 2000; this continuing bird has never been found on count day.

Among regularly occurring species, neither Bald Eagle nor Golden Eagle was found on count day—the first time that's happened since 1974. Sora and Bonaparte's Gull were also missed.

The compilation dinner ended count day on a high note, as always. Jennifer Robinson Maddox and Rue Mapp organized and served the delicious food, ably assisted by volunteers Susan Consey, Kristen Bunting, Elinor Blake, Jeffry Wilkinson, Jane Anfinson, and David Wick. Meanwhile, volunteers Della Dash, Marjorie Blackwell, and Chris Okon tempted purchasers with Golden Gate Audubon's expanded array of bird-related merchandise. Our tasks as compilers were aided by Stephanie Strait in the GGA office, and especially by the leaders of our 29 count areas and the rest of the 200 CBC participants. We thank them all (and anyone we inadvertently overlooked) for another successful count.

Finally, we invite birders of every ability and age to mark their calendars for Oakland's 70th CBC: Sunday, December 19, 2010. See you then!

—Dave Quady and Bob Lewis, Compilers



This presumed hybrid male Hooded Merganser x Barrow's Goldeneye, photographed on December 1, 2009, has been present most of the winter in or near the channel alongside Laney College in Oakland, but was missed on count day.



# SPEAKER SERIES

JENNIFER ROBINSON MADDOX, COORDINATOR



Robby Kohley

Brian Sullivan at Papallacta Pass, Ecuador. Brian has conducted fieldwork on birds throughout North America for the past 17 years. His research interests include closing the gap between science and birding.

## eBird Workshop

Monday, March 15, 2010

San Francisco: Thursday, March 18

7 p.m. refreshments, 7:30 p.m. program

You've probably been hearing a lot about eBird ([www.ebird.org](http://www.ebird.org)), the website and online birding tool that is changing the face of modern birding. The goal of this Internet-based checklist program built for birders by birders is to harness the power of both birding and science. The program allows you to keep track of your bird records online and to share them with the birding community, while making them available for science and conservation efforts. Using eBird, birders can also post sightings, keep life lists, and manage their personal records. This workshop will teach you what eBird is and why it's important that you contribute—show you what it can do for you as a birder; and teach you how to get started. Join Brian Sullivan, eBird project leader, for a look at this remarkable tool—and get empowered to make *your* observations count.

Brian Sullivan's birding travels, photography, and field projects have taken him to Central and South America, to Antarctica and the Arctic, and across North America. He has written for and consulted on various publications on North American birds. He is also project leader for the Avian Knowledge Network and photographic editor for the Birds of North America Online at the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology and the journal *North American Birds*.

**San Francisco Speaker Series:** First Unitarian Universalist Church and Center, 1187 Franklin Street at Geary. Visit [www.uusf.org/visitors\\_faq.html](http://www.uusf.org/visitors_faq.html), and use the Map It! link on the left for directions. Public transit, street parking, and parking in a lot for a fee are available.

## Volunteer Opportunities and Events

**Saturdays, March 6 and April 3, 9 a.m. – noon**

Pier 94 wetlands restoration workday. As part of our ongoing efforts to restore wetlands along San Francisco's southern waterfront, we will continue weeding the wetland and working on the new upland plots. Join us and see what birds have come back to the wetland. Refreshments provided.

**Sunday, March 14, 9 a.m. – noon**

Friends of the Alameda Wildlife Refuge workday. Help us prepare breeding habitat for the endangered California Least Terns. Meet at the main refuge gate at the northwest corner of the former Alameda Naval Air Station, Alameda.

**Saturday, March 20, 9 a.m. – noon**

White-crowned Sparrow Habitat Restoration. Participate in restoring habitat along Golden Gate Park's Bison Paddock by planting natives, weeding established sites, and nurturing the area for local White-crowned Sparrows. Closed-toed shoes and layered clothes recommended. If you are part of a group of five or more, please RSVP to [kimberly.kiefer@sfgov.org](mailto:kimberly.kiefer@sfgov.org).

**Saturday, March 20 10 a.m. – 1 p.m.**

Wetland habitat restoration at the MLK Jr. Regional Shoreline, Oakland. We will continue our work at the mouth of Elmhurst

Creek. As we weed, we'll watch the foraging and diving waterfowl and shorebirds. Refreshments provided.

**Saturday, March 27, 9 a.m. – noon**

TogetherGreen Volunteer Days. Join us for monthly workdays at Harding Park. We'll continue to weed out invasive plants to make room for native shrubs. Refreshments provided.

### Monitoring Volunteers

Volunteers are needed to monitor bird populations at Candlestick Point Recreation Area in San Francisco, beginning in March. Join GGA's conservation director to count shorebirds and land birds around the park. Information gathered on this study will be important to future decisions about the park.

### Field Trip Leaders

We are always looking for new field trip leaders to take GGA members and volunteers, as well as the public, to locations around San Francisco Bay. If you have a great birding spot that you are willing to share with others, let us know.

For updates on these workdays and for directions, visit [www.goldengateaudubon.org/volunteer](http://www.goldengateaudubon.org/volunteer). Questions? Contact Jennifer Robinson Maddox, Golden Gate Audubon Volunteer Coordinator, at [jrobinson@goldengateaudubon.org](mailto:jrobinson@goldengateaudubon.org).



# FIELD TRIPS

PAM BELCHAMBER, COORDINATOR

\$ Entrance fee

 Biking trip

For questions about individual field trips, contact the leaders. If you cannot reach a leader, contact Pam Belchamber at 510.549.2839. Field trips are also listed on the Golden Gate Audubon website at [www.goldengateaudubon.org](http://www.goldengateaudubon.org).

## Merced and San Luis National Wildlife Refuges

Merced National Wildlife Refuge

**Tuesday, March 2, 9 a.m. – 3 p.m.**

Bob Lewis, [Bob@wingbeats.org](mailto:Bob@wingbeats.org),  
510.845.5001

We will meet at Merced National Wildlife Refuge and continue on to San Luis National Refuge, looking for Sandhill Cranes, Snow and Ross's Geese and other waterfowl, and raptors, along with Tule Elk. We may make other stops in the area. Bring lunch and a walkie-talkie if you have one. Allow about 2.5 hours' driving time from Berkeley. Trip is limited to 30 participants; contact the leader to reserve a space. Carpooling is advisable.

From I-5, exit at Los Banos/Hwy. 152 east and take Hwy. 152 into Los Banos. Turn left on Mercey Springs Rd., go about 3 miles, and turn right on Henry Miller Rd. Continue for about 7 miles to Turner Island Rd. (four-way stop) and turn left. After 5.25 miles, turn right onto Sand Slough Rd., which curves to the left and becomes Nickel Rd. After about 1 mile, the road makes a sharp right and becomes Sandy Mush Rd. Continue for about 3.5 miles to refuge entrance on right (south) side of road.

## Jewel Lake

Tilden Regional Park, Berkeley

**Friday, March 5, 8:30 – 10:30 a.m.**

Phila Rogers, 510.848.9156,  
[philajane6@yahoo.com](mailto:philajane6@yahoo.com)

We continue our monthly first Friday trips at Tilden. Meet at the parking lot at the north end of Central Park Dr. for a 1-mile, 2-hour-plus stroll through this lush riparian area. Winter birds are still present, and resident birds are beginning to sing their spring songs.

## Point Isabel Regional Shoreline

Point Isabel Regional Shoreline

**Sunday March 7, 9 a.m. – noon**

Rusty Scalf, [rscalf@sonic.net](mailto:rscalf@sonic.net)

Point Isabel provides rich birding opportunities, particularly when year-round

residents are joined by migrating field birds and shorebirds.

From I-580 or I-80, take Central Ave. west to Rydin Rd. Turn right on Rydin and continue to the parking lot.

## San Francisco Botanical Garden

Golden Gate Park

**Sunday, March 7, 8 – 10:30 a.m.**

Alan Ridley, [allanrid@pacbell.net](mailto:allanrid@pacbell.net); Helen McKenna, 415.566.3241; Ginny Marshall; Dominik Mosur, [polkskatata@yahoo.com](mailto:polkskatata@yahoo.com)

Meet at the front gate of the garden, 9th Ave. at Lincoln Way. This delightful section of the park has several micro-habitats that attract an array of resident, migrant, and vagrant birds. This monthly trip is oriented toward helping beginning birders develop their skills in spotting and identifying birds.

## Las Gallinas Water Treatment Facility

Marin County

**Wednesday, March 10, 9 a.m. – noon**

Bob Lewis, [Bob@wingbeats.org](mailto:Bob@wingbeats.org),  
510.845.5001

Waterfowl, raptors, shorebirds, and passerines—Las Gallinas is always an interesting place, with chances to see otters and coyotes as well as birds. The walk is level, along the pond levees, and many birds are close and easily seen. This is a good beginning walk and also offers a wide variety of species.

Take Hwy. 101 north through San Rafael and exit at Smith Ranch Rd. (also marked for Lucas Valley Rd.). Turn right (east) onto Smith Ranch Rd. and continue toward the park at end of road. Turn left at the small sign for Las Gallinas and wildlife viewing and go to the end to the parking lot and restrooms.

## Quarry Lakes, Alameda Creek, and Coyote Hills

Alameda County

**Saturday, March 13**

Kathy Jarrett, 510.547.1233,  
[kathy\\_jarrett@yahoo.com](mailto:kathy_jarrett@yahoo.com)

Meet at 9 a.m. on the east side of the

Fremont BART station in the parking lot. Trip ends at BART between 3 and 4 p.m. We will see birds from the time we step off the BART train and will experience various habitats: riparian, marsh, and bayside. Total distance is 24–30 miles, mostly on paved bike trails. Bicycle helmet required. Bring lunch and liquids for a picnic at Coyote Hills. Dress for variable weather. Rain cancels. Reservations are not necessary, but an email or phone call is appreciated.

From I-880, take the Mowry Ave. exit east for 2.3 miles toward central Fremont. The Fremont BART parking lot is on the east side of the station past Civic Center Dr.

## Corona Heights

San Francisco

**Friday, March 19, 8 – 10 a.m.**

Charles Hibbard; Brian Fitch;  
Dominik Mosur, [polkskatata@yahoo.com](mailto:polkskatata@yahoo.com)

Meet in front of the Randall Museum, 199 Museum Way, at the end of Museum Way off Roosevelt. We will enjoy views of the city and bay as we circle Corona Heights, checking the east canyon woodland and north forest for resident birds and migrants, as well as monitoring hilltop scrub and south cliff.

## Honey Lake

Lassen County

**Saturday – Sunday, March 20 – 21**

Dave Quady, 510.704.9353,  
[davequady@att.net](mailto:davequady@att.net)

Space may still be available on this weekend trip to search for Greater Sage-Grouse, Bald Eagles, and other wintering birds of the eastern Sierra. Contact the leader for availability.

## Coyote Hills Regional Park

Fremont, Alameda County

**Sunday, March 21, 9 a.m. – noon**

Anne Hoff, [anne2210@sbcglobal.net](mailto:anne2210@sbcglobal.net)

Catch the wintering waterfowl and shorebirds before they depart for the summer and see whether some early spring migrants are back and staking out their territories. Will the Great Horned Owls



again nest in Hoot Hollow? Will the Rock Wrens hang around? Will we see more than 10 species of ducks? We'll go find out. Heavy rain cancels.

From I 880, take Hwy. 84 toward the Dumbarton Bridge. Exit on Paseo Padre Pkwy. and go north 1.1 miles to Patterson Ranch Rd. Turn left, drive into the park, and stop at the farthest parking lot next to the visitor's center. Parking is \$5, bring exact change.

## Lake Merritt and Lakeside Park

March 24, 2010

**Wednesday, March 24, 9:30 a.m. – noon**  
Hilary Powers, 510.834.1066,  
hilary@powersedit.com; Ruth Tobey,  
510.528.2093, ruthtobey@earthlink.net

Meet at the large spherical cage near the Nature Center at Perkins and Bellevue. We will bird around there, then go up the garden path toward Children's Fairyland or walk down the lake toward Embarcadero, after which we will cover what we missed. This is the beginning of spring at Lake Merritt. Come see the regular visitors and, with luck, a few surprises, too.

Take the 12, N, or NL bus to Grand and Perkins, and walk into the park on Perkins. Best parking is at the boathouse lot near the spherical cage. Entry (via Bellevue near Children's Fairyland) is free on weekdays.

## 🌿 American River Trail

**Saturday – Sunday, March 27 – 28**

Kathy Jarrett, 510.547.1233,  
kathy\_jarrett@yahoo.com

This trip follows the fairly flat, 23-mile American River Trail between Sacramento and Folsom, which is rich in birdlife. Many birds can also be seen from the train, especially through Suisun Marsh. Meet on Saturday at 7:30 a.m. at the Emeryville Amtrak Station; the train arrives in Sacramento at 9:20 a.m. The trail begins at Discovery Park, about 2 miles from the Sacramento station. Trail access is easy from the station through Old Sacramento to the river and then to the park. We will stay overnight at the Larkspur Landing Hotel in Folsom (participants must make their own reservations). On Sunday, we'll start from the Iron Point Light Rail Station in Folsom at 8:30 a.m. and return to the Bay Area via Amtrak from Sacramento at about 3:30 p.m., arriving in Emeryville at about 5:15 p.m. It is possible to make a one-day trip by driving to Folsom and using the Sacramento Light Rail system.

Allow 2-5 hours to drive from the East Bay to Folsom. Recent riding experience is a must to ensure the stamina necessary for such a long ride. Trip is limited to 12 participants. Reservations are required; contact the leader.

## 🌿 Big Break and Marsh Creek Regional Trails

**Saturday, April 10, 9 a.m.**

Kathy and Blair Jarrett, 510.547.1233,  
kathy\_jarrett@yahoo.com

Meet at Fetzer Ln. and Jordan Ln. in Oakley. Each year, nearly half of the waterfowl and shorebirds migrating along the Pacific Flyway pass through the Sacramento Delta. A paved trail with views of freshwater marsh is an excellent place to see many species. Bring lunch and liquids. Dress in layers. Bicycle helmet required. Rain cancels. If you have room in your vehicle for an extra bicycle or if you need a ride, contact the leaders at the earliest opportunity. Reservations are not necessary, but an email or phone is appreciated. The leaders will not take public transit on this trip.

Take Hwy. 24 east toward Walnut Creek, then I-680 north to Hwy. 242 north. From Hwy. 242, take Hwy. 4 east toward Stockton/Pittsburg. Stay to the right and follow the lanes signed for Rio Vista/Oakley/Hwy. 160; do not follow the Brentwood Bypass. Take the first exit, Hwy. 4/Main St. in Oakley, do not continue on Hwy. 160 to the Antioch Bridge. Go 1.1 mile and turn left at Big Break Rd. Go .2 mile and turn right on Vintage Pkwy. Go .8 mile and turn left onto Walnut Meadows Dr. After .5 mile, turn left onto Jordan Ln., which ends at Fetzer Ln. and entrance to the trail. Parking is on the street. For a map of the area, go to [www.ebparks.org/parks/big\\_break](http://www.ebparks.org/parks/big_break).

## Mines Road

**Saturday, April 24, 8 a.m.**

Dave Quady, 510.704.9353,  
davequady@att.net

We can expect to see Lewis's Woodpecker, Phainopepla, and Bullock's Oriole, and possibly Wild Turkey, Greater Roadrunner, and Golden Eagle. Trip begins in Livermore and finishes there in the early evening, with opportunities to end earlier. This trip is limited to the first 20 participants who sign up with the leader, beginning at noon on Tuesday, March 23. Carpooling is encouraged to and from

Livermore and to the trail. During the day, we will do a short detour to a watering hole. Time, date, and departure information will be provided to those confirmed on the trip. Please contact the leader.

## Yosemite National Park

**Friday – Sunday, June 4 – 6**

Dave Quady, 510.704.9353

davequady@att.net, Dave Quady at

The lower and middle elevations of Yosemite National Park are alive with singing birds in late May and early June. A variety of habitats supports a rich diversity of birdlife, typically including several flycatchers (three *Empidonax*, three vireos, seven warblers, and many other species in full song and breeding plumage. This trip is limited to the first 20 participants who sign up with the leader.

Past participants have camped at Hodgdon Meadow in the park (reservations necessary, as the campground fills up fast) or stayed in campgrounds or commercial lodgings outside the park's Big Oak Flat entrance. Detailed information, including meeting times and locations as well as lodging suggestions, will be provided to those confirmed on the trip. Confirmed participants should bring warm clothes, rainwear, and rubber boots for wet meadows, as well as lunches for Saturday and Sunday. Be prepared to walk about 3 miles each day. Carpooling is encouraged.

## Meet GGA's Birding the Bay Trail Docents

Docents with our Birding the Bay Trail program are stationed along the San Francisco Bay Trail in the East Bay from the Albany mudflats to the Richmond Marina. The teams of volunteers are equipped with scopes to show trail users the abundant birdlife and are eager to share other information about the area, from the local plants to the local history. To see when our knowledgeable docents will be on the trail, please check our online calendar at [www.goldengateaudubon.org/calendar](http://www.goldengateaudubon.org/calendar).

# Rarities Scarce and Total Birds Down for San Francisco CBC

Clear weather along the coast, light fog in the hills, and mild temperatures greeted birders setting out early in the morning on December 29 for the San Francisco Christmas Bird Count (CBC). As the day progressed, the skies became increasingly overcast. Fortunately, rain held off until around 4 p.m., when most groups were wrapping up.

The efforts of 105 birders in the field and 3 at feeders yielded 159 species—which was in the average range—but only 49,313 individual birds, a low number. Highlights were few. Greater White-fronted Goose, Brant, White-throated Swift, and an unidentified swallow were the rarest birds on count day. Prior to the count, seven Lapland Longspurs (new for our CBC) were observed flying over the Presidio. A Harlequin Duck and a Yellow Warbler rounded out the rare birds for count week.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the count was that a single Nashville Warbler was the only neotropical migrant. A few other neotropical migrants were reported during count week, but they were not exceptionally rare, like those seen in past years.

For unidentified reasons, sea duck numbers were low as well. Using five-year data blocks from 1983–87 and 2005–09, we can see some alarming trends. Lesser Scaup is down about 85 percent, Surf Scoter about 82 percent, and White-winged Scoter about 92 percent. Surprisingly, Greater Scaup numbers are essentially unchanged, and Black Scoter numbers are down only about 20 percent. When considering these figures, it is important to remember they represent

only the birds off the north San Francisco Peninsula.

The invasion of *Spartina alterniflora* hybrids, an introduced cordgrass, created conditions favorable to marsh birds at the mouth of Colma Creek, just north of the San Francisco International Airport. During the past year, the cordgrass was removed, and as a direct result, we lost all the Clapper Rails in our count circle as well as many Soras and Virginia Rails. The removal of this invasive apparently impacted shorebird numbers as well. Studies prior to the restoration project concluded that the marsh had become a habitat sink for Clapper Rails.

A cause for some concern for landbirds is the extent of tree removal on the north peninsula. Pine, cypress, and eucalyptus were planted in large part between about 1880 and 1930, and these trees are now mature. Removal of mature and dead trees for public safety and reforestation; the construction of Doyle Drive; and much-needed habitat restoration and enhancement projects have combined to reduce the amount of woodlands in our count circle. Since such forested areas are of a uniform age and mature, this is likely to be an issue in the future.

On a positive note, there may be a relationship between the increase in some raptor species and the removal of mature woodlands. Red-shouldered Hawk numbers increased about 600 percent from 1983–87 until 2005–09, from an average of 8 birds to 49. Red-tailed Hawks are up just over 200 percent during the same period, from an average of 56 to 115. On the other hand,



Eurasian Wigeons, including this male photographed in early January, were found in Colma, south of San Francisco, on CBC day.

American Kestrels are down about 46 percent, from 59 to 32.

Although Mourning Doves appear to be everywhere, our numbers indicate a 52 percent drop since the mid-1980s. Brewer's Blackbird, another species that seems abundant, has also experienced a dramatic decline of 48 percent since those first five San Francisco CBCs starting in 1983. Whether this is related to the loss of mature trees is yet to be determined.

There are some birds that we consider locally extirpated in winter, such as American Bittern, Wandering Tattler, Western Screech-Owl, Loggerhead Shrike, and Horned Lark. None of these species has been recorded on our CBC for three years or more. Ruddy Turnstone may be the next to join their ranks.

We thank Jennifer Robinson Maddox, Stephanie Strait, and Rue Mapp in the Golden Gate Audubon office for their indispensable assistance in organizing this year's count and planning the compilation dinner. Rue Mapp and volunteer Kristen Bunting helped set up for the dinner and serve the delicious food. Chris Okon oversaw the merchandise at GGA's portable Nature Store.

The 2010 San Francisco Christmas Bird Count is scheduled for Tuesday, December 28. Note that it's not too early to mark your calendar!

—Dan Murphy and Alan Hopkins, Compilers

## Keep in Touch with the San Francisco CBC

The San Francisco CBC email is [sfbirdcount@yahoo.com](mailto:sfbirdcount@yahoo.com). The compilers check the mailbox periodically until November to keep it active, and you can send a message letting them know if you are interested in next year's count. The compilers advise that if you want to receive email about the next CBC and you block spam on your email program, be sure to add the above address to your address book so messages get through. If you don't hear from the compilers by November, please contact them again.





**M**idwinter brought welcome rain, a calendar full of CBCs, and the expected mix of winter specialties and vagrants. Unfortunately, it also brought the untimely passing of Kris Olson, a leading light in the San Mateo birding world and an inspiration to birders everywhere. Kris will certainly be missed.

## LOONS TO DUCKS

A Yellow-billed Loon (*Gavia adamsii*) was described on Jan. 10 from Upper Crystal Springs Res., SM (GC). A Wedge-tailed Shearwater (*Puffinus pacificus*) in poor health was a remarkable addition to a Bolinas, MRN, yard list on Dec. 22. Taken to a rehab center in Cordelia, it died 2 weeks later (KH). Harlequin Ducks flaunted their gaudy plumage at Heron's Head, SF, Dec. 2–Jan. 1 (CS; KS, CMW) and at Duncans Mills, SON, on Jan. 3 (BK). Long-tailed Ducks were reported from 4 counties: in SM at Princeton Harbor, Dec. 4–19 (JMi; JMy, BK); on the SF coast near Mile Rock on Dec. 15 (AH); off the MRN coast at McClures Beach, PRNS, on Dec. 19 (fide DaW); and in CC waters at Carquinez RS on Jan. 2 (DeW, BG; oob).

## RAPTORS TO ALCIDS

Elusive Black Rails made brief appearances Dec. 5 at Schollenberger Park in Petaluma, SON (RB), and on Jan. 2 at Palo Alto Baylands, SCL (SS). A Rock Sandpiper was spotted crossing the Bodega Harbor channel from Doran Park, SON, on Jan. 18 (HC, RS). The season's 1st Slaty-backed Gull (*Larus schistisagus*), a 1st-winter bird, was reported Jan. 23 at Venice Beach, SM (AJ). A remarkable winter record of a Sabine's Gull was submitted Dec. 6 from Mori Pt., SM (LG, JF, EB, NEw). SM's high count for Ancient Murrelets was 6, tallied Dec. 19 at Pillar Pt., SM (LB, RT).

## DOVES TO THRASHERS

A White-winged Dove started the New Year at Phipps Country Store in Pescadero, SM (LB, RT). Another joined the Eurasian Collared-Dove flock at Olympic Golf Club, SF,



Yellow-bellied Sapsucker in Cupertino, one of seven birds that wintered in the Bay Area

on Jan. 18 (KS, DM). On Dec. 26, a Long-eared Owl picked a roost along Coyote Ridge near Fort Cronkhite, MRN (fide DM).

Seven Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers visited the Bay Area this winter, with 3 birds making extended stays at SON State Campus in Rohnert Park, SON (AK; BO, WW); in Menlo Park, SM (JL, fide BP; mob); and in San Jose, SCL (BR; mob). Red-naped Sapsuckers were ID'd on Dec. 19 near Bear Valley HQ, PRNS, MRN (fide DaW), and on Jan. 4 along Salmon Cr. Rd., SON (JB).

A Hammond's Flycatcher was banded Dec. 20 at CCFS, SCL, and recaptured on Jan. 13 (TG). Another Hammond's Flycatcher was noted Jan. 2 at Water Lane, Pescadero, SM (DM). The Oakland CBC Gray Flycatcher at Knowland Park, Oakland, ALA, remained through Jan. 11 (SC; mob). "Western" Flycatchers turned

up Dec. 10 at Cupertino, El Estero Center, and Colma (AL, RB), and Dec. 11 at El Estero, Phipps Park, SCL (W, BB). The New Year brought Eastern Phoebe to the SON Baylands Trail, SON, on the 1st of the FY, and to Francisco Mearns Bolinas, MRN, on the 24th (KH). A Gray Phainopepla settled in at Jasper Ridge Biological Preserve, SM, Dec. 15, Jan. 1 (LB, RT; mob).

## WOOD WARBLERS TO FINCHES

Overwintering warbler reports included 2 Tennessee, 3 Nashville, 3 Palm, and a Black-and-White, and 3 Northern Waterthrush. The season brought 4 Clay-colored Sparrows, including a 2nd NAB record Dec. 13, Jan. 17 along Milton Rd., NAB (DM; mob). A Vesper Sparrow was found Dec. 18 on the Ohlone Trail in Sunol Regional Wilderness, ALA (JCL, AK). High tides at Palo Alto Baylands periodically flushed the Nelson's and Swamp Sparrows through Jan. 31 (mob). A Harris's Sparrow in Santa Rosa, SON, was a nice New Year's Eve yard bird (BD). Attentive ears noted 7 Lapland Longspurs calling in flight over Battery Godfrey, the Presidio, SF, on Dec. 26 (PS).

Grosbeak reports included 2 Rose-breasted at the GGP Arboretum, SF (DM) and at a Corte Madera feeder, MRN (NWb), along with a Black-headed Grosbeak at a Fremont feeder. ALA/Jca Oriole sightings consisted of an Orchard Oriole Dec. 16 in Half Moon Bay, SM (LB, RT), a Hooded Oriole Dec. 8–21 at Menlo Park feeder, SM (PB, BP), and a Bullock's Oriole Jan. 12 in Moss Beach, SM (LB, RT, BK).

Semi-wrens separate original observer(s) from subsequent observers. All birds are listed in the order in which they were observed. Information is compiled from BirdBox transcripts and regional eBirds, the latter being the primary source for many species. Thanks to Rod Thornton for helping compile Observations data.

**Abbreviations for Observers:** AH, Alan Hopkins; AL, Alvaro Laramide; AK, Andy Kinnel; AJ, Ann Johnson; AW, Alan Wright; BB, Bill Bousman; BD, Bill Doyle; BG, Brigham Gibbs; BK, Barbara Koss; BO, Benji Olsen; BF, Bill Fowler; BF, Eric Feltner; CMW, Christine Martinez Weber; CS, Cindy Schwartz; DaW, David Wimpthorpe; DeW, Denise Wright; DM, Doreen M. Mast; EB, Edna Bartley; GC, George Graham; HC, Heather Cameron; JB, James Bickshur; JCL, John C. L.; JF, John Feltner; JMi, Jeanne Myers; JMy, Jeanne Myers; JM, Jeff Miller; KA, Ker Ackerman; KH, Keith Hansen; KS, Ken Schneider; LG, Larry G. Graham; JG, Laurie Graham; NWb, Nick Wheeler; NEw, Noeline Weeden; PE, Penelope E. Wren; PS, Paul Saraghen; PF, Rick Bright; PK, Paul Keuhn; PP, Puthie Rudis; RS, Rich Sta. Lup; RT, Rod Thorn; SC, Sue Cox; SS, Sa. Saraghen; TG, Tim G. Thayer.

**Abbreviations for Counties and Others:** ALA, Alameda; CBC, Christy Bird Club; CC, Contra Costa; CCFS, Contra Costa County Park; CP, County Park; Cr., Creek; Cyn., Canyon; DENWR, Don Edwards National Wildlife Refuge; EBC, Environmental Education Center; GGP, Golden Gate Park; L., Lake; MRN, Marin; Mt., Mount; N., North; NAF, Napa; NWR, National Wildlife Refuge; OGP, Open Space Preserve; PRNS, Pt. Reyes National Seashore; Pt., Point; Rd., Road; Res., Reserve; RP, Rohnert Park; RS, Redwood Shoreline; S., South; SB, State Beach; SCL, Santa Clara; SF, San Francisco; SFEBC, San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory; SM, San Mateo; SCL, Solano; SON, Sonoma; SP, State Park; SR, State Reserve; WPCP, Water Pollution Control Plant.

to go to Panama, we'll cheer you on. Follow the birds!

The Birdathon is also an opportunity to learn about birds, make new friends, and enjoy the wealth of the Bay Area's outdoor places. In the process, the Birdathon will generate much-needed funds for Golden Gate Audubon's educational and conservation programs.

We are coordinating trips to help you find as many birds as possible: for kids

and adults, for families and social groups, for beginners to advanced birders, and for special interests, such as birding by bike or birding via public transportation. Whether you're a beginner or a veteran, Golden Gate Audubon has a trip for you—or we'll help you create one. Use your imagination, and let it run wild.

The culmination of the event is the Birdathon Banquet in June with great food, prizes, and a bird identification quiz for some good-natured competition. Event

sponsors, prize donors, and volunteers will all be honored, and families are welcome.

For more information, visit [www.goldengateaudubon.org](http://www.goldengateaudubon.org) or contact Rue Mapp, Birdathon Coordinator, at [rmapp@goldengateaudubon.org](mailto:rmapp@goldengateaudubon.org).

## GGA's Wish List

We are seeking generous donations of binoculars and scopes. Contact [kconsey@goldengateaudubon.org](mailto:kconsey@goldengateaudubon.org).

## Donations

Thank you for your generous donations to support our many conservation, education, and member activities!

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## SYNTHETIC TURF NEEDS MORE ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

In January, Golden Gate Audubon appealed the San Francisco Planning Department's decision to apply an exemption under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) for the artificial turf conversion at the Beach Chalet in Golden Gate Park. Subsequently, the planning department withdrew its exemption finding and initiated a new round of environmental review for the project. The project would remove four soccer fields of naturally growing grass and several trees to install synthetic turf and 60-foot lighting structures, illuminating the western end of the park for the first time.

These significant changes to the park's natural character conflict with both the San Francisco General Plan and the Golden Gate Park Master Plan. Consequently, opposition to the Beach Chalet has grown to include several community groups, among them the Golden Gate Preservation Alliance, the Sierra Club, the Planning Association for the Richmond, the Sunset Parkside Education and Action Committee, and San Francisco Architectural Heritage. On January 14, the Animal Control and Welfare Commission agreed to send a letter to the Board of Supervisors and the Recreation and Parks Commission calling for an environmental review of the proposed project. Check our website for upcoming meetings, or join the San Francisco Conservation Committee to participate.

## LIGHTS OUT FOR BIRDS

Turn off the lights—spring migration is upon us! We're asking business owners, managers, and tenants to save natural resources and money, while protecting birds, by dimming or turning off lights during the spring migration, through May 31. Many birds migrate at night and may be distracted by lights on tall buildings. Birds on a nocturnal migration normally use directional cues from the moon and stars. By dimming or turning off lights, or drawing curtains and blinds, we can reduce the incidence of birds colliding with buildings. We also invite everyone to participate in the worldwide Earth Hour on March 27 by turning off unnecessary electricity for one hour,

beginning at 8:30 p.m. Check our website to add the building you work in, and join the Lights Out for Birds program.

## AUDUBON CANYON RANCH OPENS—BE A HOST AT THE MARIN HERONRY

If you want to enjoy a renowned Bay Area birding locale while sharing it with others, join Golden Gate Audubon's team of Audubon Canyon Ranch (ACR) hosts this spring. Each year, thousands of visitors come to the ACR's Bolinas Lagoon Preserve in western Marin County, which has one of the most studied Great Blue Heron and Great Egret nesting sites on the West Coast. Hosts greet and direct visitors and answer questions about the heronry. All the information

that hosts need is provided in advance.

Golden Gate Audubon's Patch helped establish Audubon Canyon Ranch as responsible for providing education, host on April 3, 11, and 19; May 1, 9, and 17; Memorial Day (June 5), Father's Day (June 14), Fourth of July (holiday weekend), Flycatcher (July 2), and Goldfinch (July 16) open with a lunch break. For more information and to sign up, please contact Maria Bratton at [ambratton@earthlink.net](mailto:ambratton@earthlink.net).

If you are unable to be a host, be sure to visit the Bolinas Lagoon Preserve. The public season runs from March 20 to July 11. Hours are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays. For more information and directions, call 415-565-0234 or visit [www.egret.org](http://www.egret.org).

## Honoring Betty Berenson

Golden Gate Audubon lost a valued member and committed volunteer when Betty Berenson died on December 13, 2009. Betty first became involved with GGA at a 2002 Restore-a-Thon. She then volunteered for the Eastshore State Park census, the San Francisco Christmas Bird Count, and habitat restoration projects at Pier 94. Because of her love for Pier 94 and Heron's Head Park, the city's southern waterfront was her favorite area to cover for the CBC.

Each workday, Betty arrived full of energy and good humor to attack the persistent patch of yellow star thistle in order to accomplish her personal goal of eradicating one of the most invasive plants at Pier 94. She often stayed late or went to the site on her own. The one thing that pulled her away was the San Francisco Botanical Garden field trips, co-led by friend Ginny Marshall. She looked forward to the monthly trips and even joined our workday after the trips ended. Her determination was astounding, yet she did not want to be lauded for her efforts, preferring to see others recognized instead.

In honor of Betty Berenson, our March 6 workday at Pier 94 (see page 5) will begin and end with birding. At 8 a.m., we will bird around the Pier 94 wetlands; at noon, when our work is over, we will bird at Heron's Head Park. Please let us know if you will attend the birding sessions by contacting Jennifer Robinson Maddox at 510-843-5875 or [jrobinson@goldengateaudubon.org](mailto:jrobinson@goldengateaudubon.org).

## Remembering Tom Condit, CBC Leader

Tom Condit, longtime leader of several Oakland Christmas Bird Count areas, passed away in early January. Although he was unable to participate in the 2009 CBC on December 20, he attended the compilation dinner with his wife, Marsha Lemland, who took sole charge of the Redwood Regional Park and Joaquin Miller Park team. Over the years, Tom, with Marsha at his side, led CBC teams in Orinda, at Briones Reservoir and Knowland Park, and, finally, for many counts, at Redwood and Joaquin Miller parks and nearby areas of the Oakland hills. An avid hiker, he began birding in 1980 when he worked in Emeryville and regularly walked to the marina area. Tom's attentiveness to many details in the natural world and his dedication to the CBC are only two of the many reasons he will be missed.

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of all turbines—have not reduced mortality as expected. Both the draft Bird Fatality Study authors and Dr. Smallwood have concluded that the only way to significantly reduce avian mortality in the Altamont Pass is to remove old turbines and replace them with new turbines that kill fewer birds or to remove wind operations from the area altogether.

Observers have recorded bird deaths due to turbine operations since the turbines were first installed in the Altamont Pass in the 1980s. The ongoing high mortality rates, combined with the unwillingness of state or federal regulatory agencies to step in, spurred Golden Gate Audubon and several others to challenge the wind companies' permits when they came up for renewal in the early 2000s. In 2007 we arrived at a settlement with Alameda County and the wind companies requiring that avian mortality be reduced by 50 percent within three years and that a habitat conservation plan be completed for wind operations in the Altamont Pass.

Golden Gate Audubon spent much of 2008 in mediation with the wind companies, arguing that their failure to adequately implement the terms of the settlement and the SRC's recommendations was resulting in a failure to reduce bird deaths. Mediation ended in late 2008 with additional

concessions from the wind companies to remove more deadly turbines.

Despite these efforts, the 2009 draft Bird Fatality Study concludes that there has not been a significant reduction in avian mortality in the Altamont Pass—certainly nothing meeting the 50 percent reduction goal. Alameda County's Scientific Review Committee and Planning Department have both publicly stated that the goal has not been met.

The only bright spot of the study is its finding that replacing old turbines with newer turbines—a process dubbed "repowering"—may significantly reduce mortality for most bird species. To date, researchers have published reports from monitoring at two repowered sites in the Altamont Pass and found that total avian mortality was reduced by approximately 77 percent at one site and 89 percent at another.

However, these studies indicate that the new turbines may result in higher mortality for Golden Eagles and bats. Dr. Smallwood and others state the Golden Eagle and bat mortality may be reduced if the turbines are located in the proper sites (that is, with lower risks of collisions) and operated in a manner that makes them safer for wildlife.

Golden Gate Audubon is insisting that the companies implement an effective and adequate adaptive management plan with specific terms to reduce avian mortality

and expedite repowering the Altamont Pass before conducting any further wind power generation activities in the Altamont Pass. This means that all the turbines turned off during the winter shutdown must remain dormant until the adaptive management plan is implemented. If necessary, we will direct our attorney to seek a restraining order in court to prevent the wind companies from operating without the adaptive management plan.

As we wrangle over how to manage the current operations, Golden Gate Audubon continues to serve on the Steering Committee for the long-term Natural Communities Conservation Plan (NCCP). Once complete, the NCCP will govern how repowered turbines are operated and maintained in the Altamont Pass and provide specific (and enforceable) conservation benefits for species such as the Golden Eagle and the Burrowing Owl. The conservation plan will include state and federal environmental review and must be accepted as adequate by the California Department of Fish and Game and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The NCCP is scheduled to be complete by the end of 2011. We hope that it will lay the framework for immediately repowering the Altamont Pass, and thereby significantly reducing risks to most birds.

—Mike Lynes, Conservation Director